

COBRA! Tigermask! KOSHINAKA! Fujinami! TAKADA! Yamada! HASE! and other stuff I saw and heard this week!

Howdy!

Welcome to DEATH VALLEY DRIVER VIDEO REVIEW #21!

I started watching the History of the IWGP Jr Heavyweight Title (Rob RULES THE DING DANG EARTH!) and got hooked into watching all five hours of it, once I started. This is the ultimate single tape to watch all at once, because you can get a good idea of how each legend of the ring compares to each other because their matches are so close together or they wrestle against common opponents, thus making comparisons easier to set up. The weirdest thing overall I found, from watching all of this, is that there is a period, between where this tape left off (3/16/89) and now, where the modern day New Japan Jr style developed and it is strange because, from where it left off, an even bigger emphasis on shootstyle seemed to be the direction that the Juniors were going.

The tape starts with Tatsumi Fujinami as a Junior and he is the prototype for the modern style much more than Tigermask I would say. He was such a solid strongstyle wrestler who could work the Luchadores' style (including a match with a younger Perro Aguayo who sucked back then too!) into his matches very fluidly and go back to being unbelievably stiff. The hyped up work rate that his matches display defined the gruelling style that the division would latch onto, which is the key to making him the prototype. The difference between him and a 90's jr heavyweight is that it wasn't a meshing of styles into one style. He was wrestling strong style but could work the Lucha style, but never incorporated it into his own style like they do today (except for his tope, I guess). His incorporation of strongstyle moves and psychology into a very fast paced match and a premium of highspots got the ball rolling for the Junior Heavyweight style we see today.

The second cog in the wheel is the TigerMask section, which is very erratic and wild as one would expect. The thing that struck me about Tigermask is that ALL the young Luchadores of today steal from TigerMask- especially in the springboard and rana department, ALL the young Japanese Juniors steal from Koshinaka and Hase- especially in selling department. Ohtani stole his "Crawl-Out_of_the_ring-After Getting "Ohtani-Killer"ed" directly from the Takada/Hase megamatch. The thing that irritated me about Tigermask is that he wrestled the same match a WHOLE lot of times and wasn't interested in selling a whole lot of anything to anybody especially anybody Mexican (See the TM/Villano III match). Whereas Fujinami would sell Mando Guerrero's odd Mexican leglocks, TM was far too busy being insecure about wrestling pro-style while fancying himself a world class shooter to make the match with Black Tiger as good as the deeply pro style Cobra would do later. I also noticed that when it came to awesome highflyers, El Gran Hamada was about as great (thus the name HAHAHA!) as you could have gotten when he was young and gave a TM a run for his money in the matches that appear on this tape, though he is more cool and graceful in the context of the match, fitting in sweet lucha sequences in at opportune moments, as opposed to the human highlight film experience of the TigerMask matches. The thing I'm left with overall after watching the TigerMask section, is that he was a great highflyer and a great wrestler, but his influence wasn't nearly as great on how

good Jr Heavyweight matches are worked today as Fujinami's, Koshinaka's and Takada's Junior days were.

Cobra's reign followed and it was also revolutionary because he was the first to really attempt to combine the Lucha elements into his mat style. The psychology of his matches were as solid as the Fujinami reign and blows Tiger Mask's spot-a-thons out of the water. Cobra was so stiff and fluid, but blows a WHOLE lot of spots because he was pushing the envelope of what he was capable of doing, it seemed to me. He also sold like a motherfucker- making the Black Tiger matches seem pretty hardhitting- though they were steeped in Lucha looseness. The Cobra/Dynamite Kid and the Saito/Cobra matches establish his stiffer work, which are all as credible as anything in the heavyweight division. Cobra is such a great lost wrestler- combining the stiffness and intensity of New Japan Strong Style and the graceful movement of a luchadore, cool mask, great matches that were rock solid in structure and execution- a true model for Eddy Guerrero and hopefully Psicosis and Juventud. I don't know why he isn't enshrined like the others in this tape.

The drastic change that hit the division is apparent in the first Cobra/Takada match where Takada BEATS the holy CRAP out of him and makes his style look so weak. It reminded me of the Maeda/Fujinami match from the HoIWGPHT tape except there is less of a defense of the pro style of wrestling by Cobra in this one. Takada just kicks the holy fuck out of him and Cobra kinda writhes on the mat taking super stiff kicks to the head as he tries to figure out how to work with this truly foreign style.

The Takada stuff is the best stuff on the tape- just because everybody in wrestling looks like such a colossal wussy compared to the level of stiffness in any Takada match. The fact that Koshinaka comes into prominence feuding with Takada at this time helps these matches hit mindblowing proportions. After watching all of these matches- which were PERFECT combinations of Pro Style selling and psychology with bonebreaking shootstyle stiffness with the intensity of the Sam Wattersonesque Koshinaka- and mix in the ultimate coolness of the two Yamazaki/Takada matches on the tape- it seemed that shootstyle was totally replacing lucha as the supporting style to compliment the main strong style that was always the basis of the Junior division. The pinnacle of this is the strange anomaly (and coolest match) on the tape- Keichi Yamada (future Liger Boy) vs Masakatsu Funaki (future Pancrase Boy). Yamada goes at it with Funaki so well in a shootstyle setting that it would seem that if the shoot style bug had gotten to young Yamada would have joined his friend Sano in that other league and would have been just as great as what he became in New Japan- just differently great. Luckily something hit Japan (Hamada's influence) that brought all three styles together into one pretty fabulous style- with lucha highflying now balancing shootstyle mat work and stiff kicks and Japanese pro style setting up the psychological starting point for both of these styles to cohabitate in harmony- with tweaking here and there for effect to lean more lucha (Michinoku Pro and, maybe one day, WCW Cruiserweight style) or more shootstyle (TAKA and Ohtani's assorted shootstyle young punk cronies.) Get this tape. It will make you glad you watch wrestling.

- Nitro REALLY sucked this week, though two matches were really good. The Rey/Psicosis match was good, though Psicosis is back to destroying his body at a frightening rate again. I hope this was just a lapse and not a trend, as I was digging the progress Psicosis was making in varying the styles in his matches. The Guerrero/Wright match was really good I thought, though devoid of any heat. Maybe if Nagata, La Parka, Jericho, Psicosis and Wright all wrestle Regal in the TV title division Alex can start rebuilding his career and Nagata's stay won't be a total wash. This week I start taping Raw. I've been putting it off for too long and they are getting too many guys I need to see but miss while taping Nitro (which I watch when I get home from rocking out! WOO-HOO! You're never too old!:()))

-In reaction to the Nasty Boy shoot, maybe the Nasty Boys will get fired -which will piss off Hogan and Dusty and they will both quit and they'll fire Duggan and Wallstreet and....

NANIWA~!

Dean Rasmussen, Super CalHEAD!